

# Gochiso – Beauty in Small Things

By Margaret Price

*Gochiso-sama* is the second Japanese word I ever used. In Japan you start a meal by saying *Itadakimasu!* (I shall partake) and end it with *Gochiso-sama!* (Thank you for the meal.) It literally means, “That was a *gochiso* (feast),” and when I was first in Japan most of my meals were indeed feasts, so later on I was surprised when someone *gochiso-sama*-ed me for giving them a banana. That’s when I first realized there was more to *gochiso* than meets the eye.

For example I discovered that *Gochiso-sama* lends itself to irony. A man might say it after being presented with an unexpected view of a woman’s cleavage: “Thanks for the treat!” And I’ve heard people say it after having the details of a friend’s private life divulged, for example, a first kiss: “Thanks for the juicy tidbit.”

But there is another use for the word *gochiso* that I find particularly revealing about the Japanese aesthetic sensibility. Let me begin by taking you to my tea ceremony lesson.

There are glowing coals in the firepit, the water in the kettle is simmering with that purr the Japanese people call “wind in the pines,” and steam is rising up and is being caught in the rays of soft light filtering through the sliding paper screens. There is a single tight camellia bud in a vase in the alcove glistening with a dewdrop.

My teacher stops me when I take the lid off the kettle. “No, do it like this so that the steam is released in a sharp burst. This is a *gochiso* for the guests.”

It was the first time I had ever heard *gochiso* used in such a context. In this case, it means “feast for the senses.” In the world of tea all of the sights, sounds and textures of the tearoom are a potential *gochiso*. And in my observation, the job of the host at a tea ceremony is to provide as many such opportunities for *gochiso* to the guests as possible.

Of course there is the literal “feast” of real food and luscious sweets and tea at a formal tea gathering, but the experienced tea guests will equally enjoy the *gochiso* of seeing, for example, the brilliant color of the grass-green powdered tea as it is made to cascade into the bowl. They might even exclaim: “*Gochiso desune* (What a treat!).”

I know of no other culture where beauty is so delicious and where so much attention is paid to small treats. In fact, Japanese people seem to have been the world’s most avid students of beauty, from which they developed many new insights. I would like to examine a few of them here.

For example, it was Japan that brought us the idea of eschewing outward ostentation in favor of hidden luxuries: a beauty that only you know exists. This extends to the interesting concept of *chirarism* – the thrill of an unexpected glimpse (*chirari*) at something of startling beauty that is normally hidden, for example a crimson lining inside a somber *kimono*. You might walk around all day with nobody knowing how wicked you are underneath. A tea ceremony pal of mine wears only the most understated kimonoes, while her undergown is the star attraction. The other day it was covered in colorful Cupids. If I hadn’t spotted something bright inside her sleeve, it would have been her secret all day. Of course, having someone spy what is hidden is all part of the game.

This unusual aesthetic was not a mutation. It developed as a result of the extraordinary social order that existed in Tokugawa Japan 300 years ago under which the samurai, though the ruling elite, were considerably poorer than the merchant class below them. This in itself is unusual, and it was one way to keep the peace, but it only worked because the Tokugawa government (1603-1868) was clever

enough to ban the wealthy merchant class from wearing silk or displaying other items of luxury since such ostentatious behavior might have ignited samurai discontent. Of course, after the merchants were banned from wearing their silks on the outside, they simply put everything showy on the inside instead, and that’s how the practice of hiding things of beauty became a game. The compulsion to hide little surprises, or at least to put them where they are not immediately obvious is still part of the modern aesthetic. Shoes, for example, might have some cute motif on the back of the heel, where the only person delighted is the stranger climbing the stairs behind you. Food vessels will often have some poetic seasonal scene on the inside of the lid, while the outside is deceptively plain. Or there might be a charming picture at the base of a cup or bowl that is only revealed once the morsel inside has been swallowed.

It was also Japan that brought us the idea of imperfect beauty; witness the oddly shaped ceramics used in the tea ceremony. One of the most famous tea ceramics is a water jar whose bulbous lower half reminds one of a seated Jabba the Hut. It has a wide crack in the front that has been patched with lacquer. Tea bowls, of course, are well known for their strange shapes. Misshapeness may be an acquired taste. I remember that my father was unable to raise a smile when I gave him a warped tea cup for his birthday. It was an expensive work of art by a recognized craftsman but my father likes his crockery symmetrical and finds it deeply disturbing if it is not.

I myself only saw the beauty in imperfection after I started buying my own ceramics and tried sharing my living space with them. The perfectly pretty porcelains I had bought turned out to be highly forgettable and soon



The misshapeness of Japanese tea bowls is an example of how something imperfect keeps our imagination engaged

were relegated to the back of the cupboard. Instead I kept dragging out one slightly out-of-shape brown *Bizen* vase to put my flowers in. Why was this piece so irresistible? The Japanese say that something imperfect keeps our imagination engaged. It is the same appeal of the *Venus de Milo*. Something incomplete is not only mysterious; it allows us to create the rest of the picture ourselves.

This is closely related to the idea of “negative” or “empty” space, which is another factor important in the Japanese aesthetic. Think of a raked stone garden or an *ikebana* flower arrangement. Their fascination lies as much in what is shown as what is not. I had never been aware that “nothing” could be “something” until I came to Japan. But once I realized that empty spaces have an equally important job to perform in this world, the genius of Japanese patterns suddenly came into view. English pattern-maker William Morris, while employing the same themes of nature as Japanese designers, felt compelled to cram every surface with symmetrical design. I find the Japanese respect for empty space far easier on the eyes and entertaining to the mind.

Earlier I touched on the way that the tea ceremony causes us to focus on the Zenish fleeting beauty of the moment – steam rising, coals burning and dew on flowers. I do not know any other culture where the joys of “small nature” as opposed to “big nature” – sweeping shorelines and stunning sunsets – are subjected to such close scrutiny and turned into the source of so much joy. Being shown how to appreciate these small joys has been one of the greatest gifts I have received from Japan.

It was also the tea ceremony that thoroughly developed the concept of *wabi-sabi*. I have seen *wabi-sabi* translated variously as “rustic simplicity” or “the beauty of poverty.” Some immediately think of cracked, earthy tones when they hear the word. My own interpretation is that *wabi-sabi* is appreciating nature doing its thing at whatever stage you find it. Artifice, contrivance and ostentation are certainly its

anathema. Witness the Korean *o-ido* bowls which were so admired by the early Japanese tea masters. They were made by poor laborers who were not interested in creating objects of beauty so there was no question of ego being involved. It is telling that similar bowls made by so-called artists have never since been able to compete with the stunning simplicity of these masterpieces.

Many people seem to think that *wabi-sabi* refers only to nubby natural materials, dry, wrinkled leaves and earthy tones, but I don’t think *wabi-sabi* is as drab as that. In fact I think that cleanliness and purity have as much to do with *wabi-sabi* as earthiness. Purity and freshness is in fact such a vital element in the Japanese ideal of beauty that the words for “beautiful” and “clean” – *kirei* – are the same and not even *wabi-sabi* can escape the compulsion to be pure. Thus *wabi-sabi* is not a dusty earthiness but a clean and dignified one.

The greatest defining factor of the indigenous Japanese religion Shinto is its reliance on purity. This has its roots in the fact that the sacred areas of a Shinto shrine must be pure to receive the god. From my observation purity seems to be a deep-seated need in the Japanese psyche which manifests not only in the sprinkling of water outside restaurant entrances, and the wearing of dazzling white collars and socks with kimono, but also in the white gloves worn by taxi drivers and in a general obsession with cleanliness in the household.

More conspicuously the need for purity manifests itself in a love of newness. Japanese people are quick to

replace old cars and electric appliances for new models and will happily tear down beautifully crafted old buildings to build anew. This can be admired when the new improves on the old, or in the case of the Grand Shrines of Ise which are routinely rebuilt every 20 years in exactly the same way. Author Donald Richie describes this as Japan’s clever way of achieving immortality for a building: a far more ingenious idea than trying to build a lasting monument in stone, like the pyramids.

Closely related to immortality is another facet of *wabi-sabi* – the part that encourages us to feel beauty in desolation and to be brave enough to accept solitariness and a lack of material possessions so that we might find a deeper wealth within. In this aesthetic I also discovered a respect for dying and decay which is lacking in my own culture – a respect so deep it acknowledges a beauty far deeper than that of the young and fresh. In the West, death is feared and shunned, and there is no poetic sentiment such as *wabi-sabi* in which we might seek solace and gain dignity. I thank Japan for giving me this perspective on life and helping me taste beauty in so many new ways. Gochiso-sama. JTI

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